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SUBJECT: MEDIA GIVES POSITIVE SPIN TO DEPUTY SECRETARY STEINBERG VISIT

SUMMARY

¶11. Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg made a brief visit to Armenia on July 11, meeting with President Sargsian and holding a short press conference with Foreign Minister Nalbandian. The visit was widely covered by virtually all television stations and the pro-government press. These outlets focused on D/S Steinberg's positive comments regarding strengthening the bilateral relationship, appreciation for the government's efforts to move forward on the Nagorno-Karabakh and Turkey-Armenia fronts, and the amnesty that freed many of those convicted following the March 1 protests. Pro-government HAYOTS ASHKHAR newspaper was the only outlet that tried to draw any conclusion from the visit, asserting that the "icy period" of U.S. - Armenia relations is officially over. The opposition press ignored the visit, probably because they had no chance to highlight their grievances. END SUMMARY

PICKING OUT THE POSITIVE

¶12. Armenian media reported factually and with little commentary on D/S Steinberg's visit. Except for the opposition press, virtually all outlets showed him meeting with President Sargsian, and most provided excerpts of his press conference with Foreign Minister Nalbandian. These excerpts focused on D/S Steinberg's comments regarding the potential for expanding and strengthening the bilateral relationship, and his admiration and appreciation for the willingness of the leadership of Armenia to move forward on normalizing relations with Turkey and finding a settlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Despite D/S Steinberg's insistence that these are parallel processes, Golos Armenii newspaper wrote that the visits of high ranking U.S. officials to Yerevan and Baku, and their attempts to persuade the officials of both countries to approve the Madrid principles, means that normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations can only proceed after the N-K conflict is settled.

¶13. Novoye Vremya, on the other hand, interpreted D/S Steinberg's remarks as a sign of U.S. approval for Armenia's positions in the Nagorno-Karabakh talks and in its negotiations with Turkey. The pro-government Hayots Ashkhar newspaper went a step further, seeing this visit and the previous one by Assistant Secretary Gordon, as signaling the end of the "icy period" following the 2008 presidential elections and the violent repression of protests afterwards. The author opines that recent steps taken by the Armenian President, especially the declaration of amnesty, have contributed to this thawing. The article also suggests that the words of D/S Steinberg give hope that MCC might review its decision to put the road construction program on hold, or that some new assistance program for Armenia might be in the offing.

¶14. Comment: The short visit and the brief press conference did not give the Armenian media much new material to sink their teeth into.

After the embarrassment of the MCC decision to continue the hold on the roads program, it is not surprising that the pro-government media would use the occasion of the visit to portray the bilateral relationship in a positive and improving light. Likewise, it is not surprising that the opposition press (limited to a few newspaper and online outlets) would not be eager to highlight a visit that did not offer them an opportunity to voice their grievances.

YOVANOVITCH